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Both Sides of the Strange Oppenheimer Story

Orig. under Oppenheimer

THE OPPENHEIMER CASE. Security on Trial. By Philip M. Stern, with the Collaboration of Harold P. Green, Harper & Row. 592 pages. $10.

Fifteen years ago a board of three eminent citizens, set up by the Atomic Energy Commission to conduct an inquiry, found that J. Robert Oppenheimer—"father of the A-bomb"—was a loyal citizen, "unusually discreet" in keeping secrets. Nonetheless he was found to be a security risk. His continued clearance to classified material was revoked. One of his three "trial judges" strongly dissented from the security risk finding as did one of the five Atomic Energy Commissioners who reviewed the findings. Oppenheimer died in 1967, 63 years old.

Much has been written about his case. But nothing so far written surpasses this excellent book in detail, in thorough presentation of the facts and a determination to give both sides of the strange story. The author, Philip M. Stern, spent three and a half years on his research and writing. He traveled 15,000 miles and interviewed about 150 persons, in the United States and Europe, in pursuit of his undertaking. His collaborator, Harold P. Green, now a law professor at the George Washington University, was an assistant general counsel of the AEC at the time of Oppenheimer's "trial" and was assigned to draw up the charges. He and Stern originally planned a joint authorship. In the end Green collaborated, planning a later book of his own.

Stern explains that his original plan was to write about a security case. But the more he learned about Oppenheimer's own case, the more he became convinced that the security system, which brought about the AEC verdict, was his major concern. "The case is now history," he writes. "The system is still with us." And his book ends up as a strong indictment of the security system and how it worked to disgrace Oppenheimer and many others who ran afoul its intricacies.

As for what it did to Oppenheimer. Will those born after the nuclear age associate his name with extraordinary and devoted service to his country, in transforming American physics and developing the A-bomb and as an important adviser in policy-making? Or will his name merely recall a scientist who got himself in trouble with the government and was adjudged a "security risk". Oppenheimer is quoted, in an interview, as having fatalistically observed: "I think of this as a major accident—much like a train wreck or the collapse of a building. It has no relation or connection with my life. I just happened to be there."

The story of how he just happened to be there is told by an author who writes exceedingly well and who attempts to base his narrative on fact. In some degree it resembles a mystery yarn, raising almost as many questions as it answers, weaving together a chronological account of events leading up to its climax, with Oppenheimer on the stand confessing, under a blistering cross-examination, that he had pointlessly lied "Because I was an idiot," thus destroying himself by the contradictions wrung from him by his interrogator, Roger Robb (now a federal judge on the Court of Appeals).

The book traces Oppenheimer's career from 1936 until his death. It pictures the brilliant young scientist as a professor of theoretical physics at the University of California, Berkeley, idolized by pupils attracted by his learning and his many gifts, unknown outside the restericted community of theoretical physics but already a legendary figure within that community.

There were two sides to his personality. On the one hand he was charming, considerate, unusually persuasive, inspirational, with a superlatively quick mind, broad knowledge and in supreme command of the spoken word. On the other hand, some of those who knew him regarded him as arrogant, with a rare capacity to belittle, wither, alienate, especially those who lagged behind his superior mentality and did not grasp his own perceptions. These traits contributed both to his rise and fall.

Many of his friends were communists or fellow-travelers in the thirties at a time when communism was regarded more as an intellectual exercise than as a mortal sin. He married a communist who had left the party. His brother and his brother's wife were communists. He made contributions, through the communist party, to Spanish relief. He belonged to a number of left-wing groups, which he dropped when he entered government service, but as far as known was never himself a member of the party.

Carefully Watched

General Leslie R. Groves and his many security officers knew all about these things when the general asked Oppenheimer to set up and run the Los Alamos laboratory, which developed the A-bomb. He was carefully watched, his phones were tapped, his conversation recorded on tape without his knowledge. General Groves respected him and stuck by him throughout all his difficulties. After the war Oppenheimer became chairman of the AEC's General Advisory Committee for seven years and was chairman of at least seven other advisory committees in the State, Defense and other departments, symbolizing the entry of scientists into government policy-making. And in the FBI, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the Atomic Energy Commission and other security organizations, there were derogatory files standing four and more feet tall, most of this evidence well known to his employers and reexamined over the years.

Admiral Lewis L. Strauss, a member of the Atomic Energy Commission, later its chairman during the AEC hearing, was a trustee of the Institute for Advanced Learning at Princeton. Shortly after the war he invited Oppenheimer to become its director. And after Oppenheimer's "conviction" as a security risk, Strauss, at a meeting of the trustees, moved that Oppenheimer be retained in that position, at an increased salary. He was still director when stricken with fatal illness.

The book traces the development of the concern over Soviet espionage in the early days of the cold war and during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. The FBI sent its file on Oppenheimer to the AEC in 1947. It was carefully reviewed and Oppenheimer was unanimously cleared. In 1954 the McCarthy era was at its height. Eisenhower had been elected, with a mandate, as he saw it, to rid the government of subversives, and had replaced the security system set up by Truman with a much stricter one of his own. William L. Borden, a lawyer and executive secretary of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, long personally preoccupied with the Oppenheimer file, quit his government job and took one in Pittsburgh. After a long struggle with his conscience he wrote a letter to the FBI, charging Oppenheimer with being a Russian agent. It is interesting to note that a consistent defender of Oppenheimer—as a Representative and as a Senator—was Richard M. Nixon.

Fateful Coincidence

By a fateful coincidence, Attorney General Brownell had recently charged Truman with having promoted a "Soviet agent," Harry Dexter White. There was quite a stir. And when Edgar Hoover and Brownell brought the Borden letter and excerpts from the FBI files to the White House, there was another stir. Eisenhower summoned Strauss to the White House, where he found Hoover and Brownell. When Strauss said he had seen the file, Eisenhower told him to conduct an inquiry into the charges and in the meantime to draw a "blank wall" between Oppenheimer and classified material.

This coincidence, more than any worthwhile evidence in the letter or the adverse material in the files, brought about the "trial," described by

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